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### **published in**

Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association of Mission Studies  
2018

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1163/15733831-12341590](https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341590)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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### **citation for published version (APA)**

Paas, S., & Schoemaker, M. (2018). Crisis and resilience among church planters in Europe. *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association of Mission Studies*, 35(3), 366-388. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341590>

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# Crisis and Resilience among Church Planters in Europe

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## Abstract

Church planting – the creation of new Christian communities for missionary reasons – is becoming increasingly accepted among the larger churches and denominations in Europe. As church plants in the secular parts of Europe are usually under-resourced, and remain small, the normalization of this entrepreneurial approach of church and mission raises the question of its sustainability. Part of the answer to this question lies in the resilience of church planters; that is, those who lead these enterprises. In this paper we present the results of a qualitative study of European church planters, with a view to their coping with what often appears to be a mixture of high expectations, unclear structures, and a difficult “market.” This research shows the particular nature of crises in the life of a church planter, while identifying sources of resilience. Its results are relevant both for the assessment of church planting projects, and for the training and coaching of church planters.

## Keywords

church planting – leadership – resilience – sustainability – crisis – spirituality

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Church planting, or the creation of new Christian communities in the interest of outreach and mission, has become a common feature of European church life in the last decades (Paas 2016). While this practice originally belonged to the rather small-sized domain of so-called “free churches” (Baptists, Pentecostals, etc.), European mainline churches have recently embraced church planting as they face the growing secularization of their societies. As a consequence, the European ecclesial landscape assumes features of an entrepreneurial approach of church and mission (cf. Volland 2015; Foppen et al. 2017). This approach is often influenced by the North American religious market paradigm which holds that modern, religiously pluralistic societies where church and state are separated can be considered as markets in which disestablished religious organizations compete for clients. Thus religious organizations (churches, etc.) are not passive victims of modernization processes, but active and strategic players instead. Clearly, church planting for growth or innovation can be part of such an active strategy (Paas 2016:111–241).

Viewed through the lens of missiology, a religious market approach of religion in Western societies highlights the importance of church planting rather than adapting to church decline. Churches can actually do something about their situation, and this requires a pro-active, missionary strategy. Also, as Stephen R. Warner has suggested in a classic paper, it requires that “those who focus on individuals and organizations would analyze entrepreneurial as well as bureaucratic and professional religious careers” (1993:1081). In other words, the biography and role of the church planter comes into the light of research. However, “[a]lthough most books on church planting contain chapters on church planters’ vocation and spiritual formation, and although mission organizations usually have some evidence-based measures by which they select and assess their church planters, surprisingly little scholarly research has been done into the personalities, roles, and careers of these religious entrepreneurs” (Foppen et al. 2017:25).

Church planting literature tends to draw rather heroic and stereotypical pictures of church planters (Moore 2002; McNamara, Davis 2005:72–78; Stetzer 2006:81–87; Patrick 2010). Rather than being based on actual empirical research, this reflects the high expectations with which church planting is associated. Its advocates expect church planting to further conversion growth even in secularized regions, and to be a laboratory of the necessary renewal of the church in the West. Such high expectations may easily lead to stress and exhaustion among church planters. After all, most church plants in Europe remain small, while their resources are limited. Also, working in a deeply secular environment may take its toll. Moreover, as Craig Ott and Gene Wilson claim, “many church planters, being highly task oriented, have a tendency to

overlook personal challenges, and neglect some dimensions of their personal lives" (2011:305).

This perceived vulnerability of new church formation in secularized areas may lead to the question to what extent these attempts are sustainable. This is not only an important question for the future of Christianity in Europe, but also for the workers involved in these projects and their sending organizations. In order to gain a more evidence-based view of the long-term sustainability of church planting projects, research is needed into the particular challenges church planters face and into the resources they draw from in maintaining or increasing their resilience. In this article we present such research, based on several dozens of interviews and two group meetings with church planters in Europe. After presenting the pioneers' experiences of crisis and resilience, we will conclude this article with a brief discussion of the most important findings.

## 1 The Research Project

This research focuses on plants that have been started within the past ten years, and are initiated by Reformed (or related) churches in Amsterdam and other Western European cities. In 2015–2016 31 pioneers (26 men, 5 women) were interviewed. Most interviewees (22) were, or are, working in The Netherlands. The other interviewees work or worked in cities in Great Britain (6 people), Ireland (1 person), Czech Republic (1 person), and Germany (1 person). Therefore, a slight Dutch bias may be expected in this research. Most interviewees were born in the country where they are working. Amongst the interviewees there were also a few who coach other church planters from their own experience. Four other people from The Netherlands (two men, two women) were not interviewed as church planters but in their role as close friend of a church planter, in order to include their perspective to the story.

Interviewees were found via "snowballing."<sup>3</sup> The interviews were done face-to-face, by Skype or telephone and lasted on average, an hour. After a short introduction to the research open questions were used to focus in on experiences of crisis and hope. All experiences have been made anonymous; individual pioneers are referred to by capitals (A, B, etc.). The interviewees were all in different phases of the church planting process and had various experiences of crisis of whatever measure. At least eight of the pioneers interviewed had to

3 That is, by asking existing participants to refer or recruit other individuals.

stop working due to a crisis. Some became involved in other church planting initiatives at a later date.

The insights from the interviews were shared in two meetings with church planters involved in the research, allowing them to provide feed-back and additional experiences. The first was held in Amsterdam in December 2015 and was presented as a focus group for church planters on hope in crises. The second meeting was a workshop during a church planters' conference in Lisbon (April 2016). This session had 25 participants (14 women, 11 men) with an average age of 35 years old. In the second meeting a number of subjects were further discussed in groups of twos and threes. In this meeting the participants filled in a short questionnaire, anonymously if desired.

Unfortunately, ages of the church planters were not recorded. However, from two simultaneous quantitative research projects among European church planters, a mean age of 41 appeared, with the largest number being in the 26–45 year range (Foppen et al. 2017; Foppen et al. forthcoming).

The actual research was done by Marry Schoemaker-Kooy, who is a trained anthropologist and a journalist. Project management lay with Siebrand Wierda, who is a church planter and a social entrepreneur. Methodological supervision of the project was done by a team from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, including Stefan Paas (Professor of Missiology), Joke van Saane (Professor of Religious Psychology), and Dr. Miranda Klaver (Assistant Professor of Religious Studies).

## 2 Results

Resilience has become a theme in literature on the pastorate lately (Allain-Chapman 2012; Burns et al. 2013; Searby 2015; cf. Jackson-Jordan 2013). Most of this literature focuses on causes of burnout, such as high role expectations and constant exposure to profound human need and suffering. Among the remedies mentioned are the development of interpersonal skills, having relationships outside the congregation, paying attention to personal spirituality and good mentorship, and the like. However, all this research concentrates on pastors in established settings rather than on church planters or missional pioneers. While similar causes and remedies are mentioned by the church planters under review, this research shows that there are considerable situational differences between “regular” pastors and church planters, such as lack of structure, role expectations that are even higher, and a pressing lack of resources. On the other hand, recent research demonstrates that there are significant personality differences between regular pastors and church planters,

rendering it likely that they will cope with stress differently at least to some extent (Foppen et al.: forthcoming).

### 2.1 *Experiences of Crisis*

In a Dutch study, church planting is compared to surviving on a tundra as opposed to the tropical rainforest of the established church (Noort et al. 2008:293). This image may highlight some of the specific challenges confronting church planters due to the nature of their work. Being under-resourced in terms of people and money and facing an uncomfortable religious climate, while carrying high expectations of growth and change at the same time, many pioneers are struggling with the immensity of their task. "Working in an established church is like rowing on a river, but church planting is like being on an ocean; it gives a disorientating feeling" (A). The "tundra-character" of their work is also illustrated by the possible impact of their choices, both positive and negative (B). Moreover, working together intensely in small groups with high expectations, and unclear boundaries, can easily lead to unhealthy relationships (cf. Van Saane 2012:69). Finally, the secular context is often experienced as susceptible for crises. One of the church planters, (D), told of the hope and love that she experiences in her work but also said, "It is never simple or clear in this world, the message of the kingdom is controversial and sometimes hard to swallow." If there is little response to the gospel, the pioneer can feel sad. "It is work demanding high investment and low yield," according to one of the pioneers (E). Interviewee D described it as "Cycling into the wind. It's unknown paths demanding endurance. You have to be crazy to do it." Here are some of the factors contributing to the "tundra-experience" of these church planters:

1. *High and unclear expectations.* Many pioneers are by personality and background rather idealistic and visionary and enjoy exploring new ways. Some have grown up in mission-minded families. The stereotypical image of the pioneer also plays a role. The pioneer is seen as male, expressive, outgoing, brave, good on stage, "possibly with a wife standing beside him." Female pioneers or those with different personality types may feel they cannot live up to these expectations. Another church planter (A), said that due to the entrepreneurial background of his family, he feared failing as an "entrepreneur." Being the only professional in the church planting team, and the most visible leader, may also become a burden. Pioneers are expected to remain accountable for their personal lifestyle and the way they relate to church frameworks. Accountability is hampered, however, by the mixed nature of expectations: one person may think that the church plant isn't innovative or creative enough while the

other thinks it is close to the limits. The pioneer needs to steer a path through all this. Also, performance expectations are often high, but criteria for success are often unclear. The number of people that come to services is regularly taken as a measure, and brings a sense of failure if church plants do not grow. However, this demands the question whether a larger community, by definition, is a better community. And whether it is possible to *make* a church. "You can give it everything, but ultimately the church community is a grace-gift of God," said one of the pioneers (G). Experiences of reality not being consistent with plans previously made can cause stress.

2. *Uncertainty about finances and facilities.* "A pioneer faces constant financial pressure" (D). Insufficient training, a lack of good working conditions and support following the expiry of a temporary contract were all mentioned. Some pioneers suggested that this situation is often worse than for regular pastors and missionaries sent by church denominations, although the climate for church planting has become more positive. Still "a pioneer has to work it out himself" (B). Sometimes financial support is conditional on success, and this can result in pressure that some pioneers do not function well under. If a team is small, the church planter often has to do many various activities themselves. "I copy, make flyers, keep the website up. You don't have a whole group of people who are willing to do all sorts of jobs," said B. If these tasks do not fit well with the pioneer and they are taken on for long periods of time, or if the pioneer does not take sufficient rest, fatigue will almost inevitably be the consequence. The feeling of dependence, however is expressed by some as a good experience. "You live closer to God. And because you're looking for support, you can always talk about and share the work and invite people to be involved," stated H (spouse of B).
3. *Team challenges.* Several pioneers mentioned how painful conflicts within a team can be. One pioneer (C) explained what he found most difficult, "When people who you feel are close to you, who you expect to cover your back, stab you in the back. They desert you. That is the worst; head and shoulders above everything else." Sometimes it is difficult to put a good team together.

One minute someone wants to be secretary of the church, three months later, they are no longer in the church. Team members also have strong boundaries, "No, I can't then, I don't want to then." Sometimes it feels like we have to do everything alone (I).

Respondent Y says: "In the city especially, it is difficult to find people who are able to commit for longer periods of time. So you can start to feel responsible and doing things that you shouldn't have to do, that's how people burn out." Delegating activities can also be difficult if the pioneer is uncertain about the vision and skills of others. Sometimes team members leave due to moving house, or illness, or sometimes due to a difference in vision (B). Sometimes church planters are frustrated by the lack of motivation around them. Apparently, not many Christians are prepared to leave their comfort zones to become part of a team (K). And sometimes those who do want to be part are notorious trouble makers (cf. Van der Molen 2008:191).

4. *Encounters with broken lives and unbelief.* Pioneers experience difficulties in coming into contact with the brokenness in the lives of others (M). "In deprived neighborhoods the problems overwhelm you. And the commitment of pioneers is often so high that to stop often feels like being a traitor" (L). Skepticism among people with whom the church planter comes in contact, can also cause real doubts. The experience of people dropping out can do this too. In situations where the pioneer has children and a lot of people come to the private home worries can arise about the impact of vulnerable or damaged people on the children. Also from a broader perspective the family may be put under pressure by the impact of the work. In interviews some older pioneers said that they look back with regret on the years when they had given too little time and attention to their spouse and/or children. During the workshop in Amsterdam various people (anonymously) responded affirmatively to the statement "My marriage is under pressure from work or the way I deal with it." The statement "I suffer from sexual temptation," was recognized by several people in both workshops.
5. *Doubt and spiritual struggle.* Several pioneers mentioned spiritual struggles which were manifested in, for example, disease, discontent, gossip and conflicts (A, B, I, L, N). A church planter who had to stop working after a crisis, (A), described how he felt that God was against him.

The brutality of the spiritual attacks (diseases, depression, people dropping out,) under which we suffered was terrible. One time at three o'clock in the morning I was lying on the floor holding the hand of our daughter who could not sleep. For an hour I had this feeling that God is terrible. But after two hours came the feeling, "I trust in God." I went through all the emotions. That takes time, and you can see that even in people in the Bible. I am not a special case. It changed my faith.



In the questionnaire during the Lisbon workshop eight people responded that they find it hard to find trust in God rather than become skeptical, cynical or discouraged. This also came out in some of the interviews. Some, however, expressed how the faith of new Christians or Christians with different cultural backgrounds can provide new perspectives. Others said that “peripheral issues” became less important and that Jesus had taken a more central position. Or that they experienced more space to ask questions from an understanding that God is bigger than the image that they had had.

This includes the shifting of theological opinions. In the same survey six people reported that their convictions had changed in the field of the creation and the beginning of the world. This also came out in two interviews. Eight people indicated in the questionnaire that their beliefs in heaven and hell and God’s judgment changed and four people stated this in the interview. In interviews some pioneers explained that they got stuck trying to make the connection between theology and the practice of everyday life. One pioneer (O) described his difficulty in continually evaluating the faith and behavior of others in order to assess if their eternal destiny was in danger. He has come to believe that there will ultimately be no hell. Others believe that choosing for or against Jesus really does matter in the end.

Some pioneers said that they do not see it as their task to convince others, but to live according to God’s kingdom or to work for the prosperity of the city as in Jeremiah 29. In this way they hope to bring people into contact with the gospel. They want to trust that God also works among people who are not Christians, and assume that conversion is not done by man but by God’s Spirit and that judgment is also up to God. Some pioneers disclosed that they had become more aware of God’s love and grace. Their beliefs about right and wrong had become less “black and white.” Furthermore, some pioneers spoke about a process of releasing “religious ideas about how things should be done” in order to reach out to others.

As evangelistic work entails close relationships with those of other persuasions, questions of faith can be accompanied by anxiety about losing oneself. Interviewee L: “I find it difficult to be interested in others. It feels like a threat to my identity and faith, the fear that there is some truth in that. I see it in others too, the fear of losing the true faith or the gospel.” P described seeking a connection between faith and other people as a no man’s land. “When you find new forms, you do not know exactly how you will find Christ. I am sometimes really worried that I’m doing it wrong.”

In the questionnaire completed during the workshop in Lisbon, 11 people indicated that they find it difficult to believe or do things in a way that differs from their (church) background and eight people indicated that they find it hard to believe or do things differently than the rest of the team or the community. This was also said in a few interviews. Moreover, if the pioneer's faith changes along the way and if he or she has struggles in their faith, there is not always room to discuss it openly within the team, community or supporting church (E, L, O, P, Q, R, D). One respondent compared it to a coming-out (O).

6. *Deconstruction and incomprehension.* Often, church planters feel caught between their loyalty to the existing church and social groups the need to deconstruct traditional church models in the interest of mission. Recognition and support from the established church is felt as being very important, but often lacking. Several church planters described how complicated it is to connect in new fields from the Christian faith. P: "As a pioneer you represent the church in society; praying, sharing Bible stories, leading funerals and other rituals. And that means something to a lot of people, even if they do not believe. Even if this is very difficult, with various conflicting interests, I won't give up this role as representative of the church." She says that this approach has cost a lot and that she has often felt lonely and unsupported by the wider church.

Due to factors such as these, pioneers suffer from loneliness and exhaustion. This may be aggravated by their tendency to work solo. Many of them think "out of the box" and find new ways of sharing the gospel that connect with the culture. But if they do not find recognition, feelings of being misunderstood and loneliness can rear their heads. Church planter T: "I have always worked in pioneer situations, and I think that's my calling, I thrive on it." But he added: "It also has a price. Sometimes you feel exhausted, alone or misunderstood." Alongside the nagging feeling of disappointment, the idea, "I should be doing it better" arises. K: "Then I read again about the numerous baptisms in another church and get the feeling we're lagging behind here." The entrepreneurial element appears to play a role. "The idea of having to be the best in your industry." On the other hand, the experience of success can easily lead to complacency, as S explains.

You've now turned forty, have a family, have a surer sense of yourself and feel a bit lazy. You think, "We've made it, we've become influential." Maybe because people flatter you or like your church. But then you get

proud. And that prevents you from learning more, because you think you already know it. And you won't grow anymore.

Fear of arrogance sometimes manifests itself in uncertainty. N said he was completely blown away after a compliment, because he felt that the work depended on him. In addition to this two people who coach pioneers said that pioneers are often reluctant to ask for help. Exhaustion is therefore a major risk for pioneers. During the workshop in Lisbon 18 of the 25 participants indicated that they often feel tired or find it hard to relax. Half said that they frequently feel exhausted. It was also mentioned in some of the interviews. The questionnaire asked participants to give a grade on a scale of 1–10 about their own well-being. 21 people filled this in: of these 14 people gave the well-being 6–8, seven people gave a 2–5. The impact of this is most probably felt both at home and in the team.

## 2.2 *Resources of Resilience*

Clearly, church planting comes with considerable personal, social and spiritual challenges. How do these church planters cope with them? When it comes to sources of strength, the factor of trust stands out most. Almost all interviewees indicate that their major source of resilience is the confidence that it is all God's work and responsibility. In addition, trust is important in close relationships: one's family, team, network, and supporters. This confidence does not solve the crisis experiences, but it does create some breathing space – an opportunity to actually deal with them rather than undergo them. The following particular sources are mentioned:

1. *Living in confidence and grace.* Several pioneers shared that they experienced more space through an awareness that God's grace is the source of missionary work and that God is responsible for the mission (*missio Dei*). An effect of this can be seen in one's personal identity and spirituality when facing difficult issues or opportunities, and a greater ease in relationships with others. In discussions it was said that such an understanding that responsibility for the mission lies with God is experienced as a call to follow God and as an invitation to find strength in him (P, N). Pioneer T defined hope as "the confidence that God will be active in my future." E states:

Missionary workers are often huge doers with high ideals, who try to organize, instead of letting it happen. But if you live in peace, trust and

relationship with God, you can accept yourself and learn from others. Then you can connect to what God is already doing and move together with the work of the Holy Spirit. That's a world of difference.

Similarly, both J and G emphasize that it has to do with realizing that "the kingdom of God is much greater than your place, your church." During the workshop in Amsterdam many agreed with the statement: "I find it very reassuring that this work is ultimately God's work and experience that too."

Several pioneers mentioned in addition that the gospel allows you to find your personal identity in God's love and not in performance, activism or managing projects (e.g., U), and that "seeking God can help us rise above ourselves" (G). Meeting with people who live by grace, can be inspirational. A confrontation with vulnerability can be quite painful, but also offer some new freedom. For example, in order not to fall back on the familiar, such as a "flashy Sunday service," or project plans, but to actually experiment to find appropriate ways in relevant contexts. Then it is important to be realistic: "An average pioneer work grows to 50 or 60 people and remains vulnerable. Let's be honest about it," said supervisor J.

It is important to realize that working in missions is a learning process. The outcome is uncertain and some things will not work. However, the awareness that it is God's mission, and that success does not depend on our efforts, brings tolerance for failure. With sufficient self-reflection and capacities to learn something can really be learnt here, noted EE. Supervisor X added:

If all our pioneer places only succeeded either heaven has come to earth, or we haven't been experimental enough, and probably the last. In my opinion we should be doing new things, doing things that aren't proven to be effective, that we sometimes after some time have to conclude: "It's not working; we need to stop."

The idea that it can "fail," even if money has been given for it, is like a breath of fresh air. In a culture of grace others do not get scared by the crises of the pioneer. Interviewee Z: "If you are really in a crisis, you feel very small, insignificant and worthless. What has helped me is that people were not scared, were not angry, did not say: 'That's what I'd been saying for a long time,' but gave me the feeling that I could speak about everything and that they wouldn't judge me."

2. *Know yourself.* Church planting triggers all the weaknesses of a person, noted supervisor W. Different pitfalls present themselves at different stages. Being aware of this and the general welfare of the pioneer is essential, says U. "Often we first ask how many people are coming to the meetings, and whether the church plant is financially independent yet. That is important, but secondary. How the pioneer is really doing is the primary question" (similarly, AA).

An awareness of grace can give courage to see one's own emotions (including anger) or possible doubts, and to go to God with them and keep that in tension. "Going with all the rubbish in your heart and soul, to God," said one of the church planters during the workshop in Amsterdam. In order to do this, the pioneers need to have developed their own personal spirituality. They should live out of this relationship with God, while not only using their time for meditation by looking for insights to share with others. This can be difficult. In the workshop in Lisbon 19 out of 25 responded that they think personal prayer/meditation or silence is essential. At the same time 17 people responded that they find it hard to find the time (13 people indicated that they spend 0–2 hours per week, 10 people 2–4 hours and two people more than 7 hours). Yet prayer is essential to be able to be with God and live from that source, said several pioneers in the interviews (M, I).

Knowing and respecting one's physical and spiritual needs is part of a healthy professionalism in church planting. The interviewees appeared to have found various ways: a monthly retreat day, sports, finding time to be alone or with a few close friends, an annual visit to a monastery for a week, music, writing, studying, various forms of fasting, focusing on their own neighborhood and minimizing networking events, keeping every morning free until nine o'clock for breakfasting together and seeking God, five times a year going on a midweek retreat, keeping one day a week free. One supervisor (U) stressed that it is important that pioneers are not encouraged to "be a hero." Insufficient sleep and too much work are indicators that something needs to change quickly, he said.

Having a good and realistic job description (J) and a good knowledge of your own limitations is part of the job. Practically speaking it is important to have a good balance between work that demands energy and work that gives energy. During the workshops and interviews, many pioneers expressed that they find administrative tasks and routine work difficult. Sometimes ways are found to share these tasks with others. Grace creates space to honestly acknowledge what your capacities are and to

accept that you cannot do everything you may want to. A work space out of the home but in contact with others seemed to help some pioneers.

Also, it is important to have insight into one's motivation for the work. Risks are that the pioneer may feel the need to be a "rescuer," "hero," or "mother," may need the appraisal of other people, or may misuse people in order to realize their own goals. Baggage from the past can also play a role here. Getting feedback from others is really important in this area, but it can be difficult for the pioneer to be open to such criticism. Sometimes a practical solution can present itself. Pioneer W, who himself knew that he always wanted to be the best, looked for a sport which he could excel in. In this way he did not need to be the best in his work as church planter.

Self-awareness is also necessary in order to know when it is time to stop a certain project or hand it on. A few pioneers described how, when their pioneering project got into a different phase, they started to miss some connection and began to feel tired or bored (Q, Y, Z, AA). The interviews showed that there can be all sort of reasons why the pioneer does not hand the work on. They may have become devoted to the church group, get asked to stay, do not dare to hand it over, have not seen any good working examples of work being passed on, feel financially dependent on the work, or have a spouse who wants to stay. But experience shows that handing it on at the right time and starting again elsewhere can bring renewed strength.

3. *Relationships with others.* The knowledge that God is the source offers the potential to be more relaxed in contact with other people and to be more open. Pioneer D described the following experience following a difficult period: "When I was able to see my work in the context of God's work, I realized that I didn't need to do it alone anymore. That I was being carried on the path that God takes with people" (also Z). Pioneer K discovered that the gospel offers the opportunity to value other people's growth process. Two pioneers mentioned that in the church community it is not about who is inside or outside the boundaries but about Jesus as the center. And that each person moves from their own position towards the center. And pioneer L discovered that with the acknowledgement that God is the source, he felt less threatened by the ideas of others.

Staying centered on God's mission with people leads to focus in work. H: "It's important to give time to seekers. You can get impatient, but God takes a journey with each one. And He promises that He will continue with what He has begun. If we thank him our eyes will be open to this."

That process can take generations, suggested L. Three pioneers mentioned the example of Jesus saying to the disciples that those who are not against him are for him, that the wheat and the weeds grow together, and that in Corinth the rich and poor sat together at the communion table. G: "We shouldn't try to force the two apart. We'll see at harvest time." Interviewee K: "Whether people come to faith is up to God alone." This counteracts pride and self-righteousness, or an unbearable feeling of duty (similarly, P).

4. *Prioritising marriage and family.* Alongside the concern for one's own welfare, it is essential that marriage and family (if applicable) are prioritized above the work. The work can bring much pressure on a marriage and family. Sometimes this insight is born from within a time of crisis; that from the basis of a relationship with God it is essential to give enough time and attention to each other. This is important, even more so because these relationships have a deep impact on the church planting work. The spouse often sees the struggles of the pioneer and can support him or her, to possibly pray with them and gives insight into character and behavior and to help make sensible decisions. It's important to get to know and understand each other well for this. If there are signs that distance is growing or that communication is not going so well, it's important to ask for help on time, said AA. It can be taboo to talk about it, said D and others. It was said that in preparation time, it would be helpful to discuss with couples what the challenges might be. Within the church community it is also important that the spouse and his or her contribution is recognized. It seems best not to see the spouse as a sort of coach. One participant at the Lisbon workshop said that discussing all sorts of situations with your spouse was risky. "Often you tell them about the problem but not about the next steps, your wife holds on to it and can suffer."

The needs of a spouse need to be respected. "It is really easy to ignore your partner or take them for granted, but one day you realize that you've damaged something and that it's difficult to put it right. You have to have enough time and attention for each other," said BB from his experience. In the workshop many agreed with the comment that it sometimes felt as though everybody had access to the pioneer's agenda apart from the spouse. Various pioneers had had crises due to wrong choices made in this area. BB: "If you have a meeting with someone of the opposite sex make sure it's always in a public place."

The needs of children (if applicable) are also important. There has to be time to relax and have fun together especially if the children get older and go to bed later. R:



If I was reading for our daughter and someone came to the door I'd tell her, "Sorry sweetheart, you'll have to wait." At a certain point I thought, "Hang on, this should be the other way around." I didn't want people to get the feeling that I was rejecting them. But I really needed to choose for my children.

A number of pioneers also mentioned setting boundaries to protect their children from damaging behavior of people in the church, especially since the planter's private home is often considered as a working and visiting space. Financial worries can also be a real pressure for a spouse, and children can suffer from it (BB).

Several practical solutions were found to better balance the needs of the family with the ministry. N: "In the early years I'd often respond to an urgent text message in the middle of the night. Now I often react differently, turn the phone off at night. I work less evenings." K and his wife often invited two couples to eat. These couples then get to know each other. CC and his wife asked a number of people to commit to the mission by getting alongside their family and regularly looking after the children. They also keep Saturdays free for family time. The culture of a church group plays a role here. Z: "It's important that the pioneer feels enough freedom to take a day off, to do something fun with his or her partner. That he's not constantly thinking about the sermon that needs to be finished whilst he's watching his children's football match."

5. *Trust in working together as a team.* Trust within a team is also a strong source of resilience. In a team something needs to have been learnt and experienced about being church in praying together and being able to talk vulnerably with each other, said mentor X. Interviewee L: "You need a group of people who are on a journey of faith together and choose for a certain way of life because of this." It takes time to put a good team together with members with a healthy motivation, but it is time well spent. It is important to build trust and safety and to share personal stories, for example in sharing meals together. "So you stay together if things get 'ugly' or it's no fun anymore," said E. B discovered: "It's not about the specific activities, strategy or opinions about it, but about sticking together and trusting the Holy Spirit and your relationship with each other. Praying and reading together and discovering what God reveals to you." C mentions the need of humility, and being able to say sorry and to forgive as a crucial requirement (cf. Noort et al. 2008:329).



Having enough members in the team to share the work with was also mentioned. Here, it is important that the pioneer really takes the lead in the first period of time, said several people. Q: "You shouldn't be constantly trying to reach agreement." If nobody can be found for a certain task, you sometimes have to have the courage just to let it go. E: "To see how God provides and where you should focus your attention. You can only discover that in stillness."

To assign somebody outside the team whom the team can trust and who keeps up to date with the ins and outs of the team was seen as meaningful; they can advise and mediate if the team gets into difficulties together. Sometimes two people both work part-time as pioneers alongside other work (see also Noort et al. 2008:277, 298). This was seen as fruitful though, of course, working in a team is not always easy for those who are used to going solo (J). Paul and his friends were cited as examples and also Jesus sending the disciples out in twos. If both have a real pioneering spirit, it was added, competition can arise. One option could be to put a "pioneer" and "church-developer" together in a team. The pioneer leaves the church after a few years and starts elsewhere, the church developer continues with the church fellowship.

6. *Network, friendship and mentoring.* The interviews showed that the trust and support of a mentor, spiritual director or a few friends is essential for hope and resilience – on top of the support of a potential spouse. In the workshops the majority said that they really need someone who listens to them and understands them, who is not a colleague and is not involved in your employment. A few people said that they did not have a friend, mentor or coach who they can speak to openly. Other participants encouraged them to ask someone to do this for them. However, not every church planter appeared to have such a friend. In a safe relationship the opportunity is there to discuss questions honestly, to look at causes of exhaustion and to pray together. At the Lisbon workshop, on the questionnaire participants were asked to indicate with a cross which of the subjects they would prefer not to answer honestly. The subjects which came out most highly were: Are you concerned that the work will be too much for you? (11 times) Have you had bad/angry feelings towards somebody else in the past month? (10 times) Have you recently thought about stopping? (9 times). Do you have sexual temptations? (7 times). Coach L: "Men often want to sort everything out themselves and struggle with disappointment and shame. It is important to keep probing about the ideas

that they have of what they have to achieve. It's not always mentioned. And people need to be ready for it, it requires real courage to look your own sadness in the eyes."

Deciding which questions are going to be asked in advance helps. Many pioneers said that it's good to regularly schedule these times of meeting together into a rhythm that fits well with the pioneer. B: "The average nature of a pioneer's character is that he or she is inclined to go alone. It is good to be forced to work together and to look for places where you can be coached" (also DD). And M: "At critical times, God uses other people who have known how to push beyond my boundaries, because they always do that, and in those times, too."

In the interviews some pioneers shared that they had been shocked when they had heard that a fellow pioneer had "messed up." Even if you are in contact with someone a lot, it can be difficult to see how someone is really doing. To ask the difficult questions and respond can require real courage. Z:

Someone came to me and said that I was doing too much. I was angry with him. It really wasn't going well then, otherwise I would never have been like that. He took it back, but the fact that I responded like that showed that he was right. You're really powerfully driven. We often think, "What gives me the right to interfere?" Or maybe we don't have the skills to say it in the right loving way.

Interviewee U experienced that intervention can sometimes be necessary.

My wife asked two of the church leaders to come along and tell me to take leave. They said: "You're on leave and that's as of now, no questions, no excuses." Just going on with what you have always done is often the path of least resistance. But through such an intervention the path to change is made easier than continuing. I didn't have the energy to refuse them.

Discussing issues in groups with other pioneers is also an option, but pioneer Y said that it was less suitable due to feelings of competition that may be present. However, U mentioned that he had found it beneficial meeting informally monthly at a meeting of several pioneers from various networks. And Godwin (2011) sees that, alongside coaching from a mentor, informal networks of pioneers and their spouses sharing

knowledge and experience can also be beneficial. This is particularly true in contexts where there is not a church that can support the pioneer in their situation.

7. *Denominational support.* Church planters said that the denomination and supporters play an important role. It is important that they do not focus on monitoring, project-plans and reports, but offer support from the heart and in faith. The starting point should be that the gospel invites us not to take control but to follow God. D:

As a pioneer you always have this area of tension. You often need the church for a certain amount of safety and minimum right of existence, but you also have to be prophetic to a certain extent if you ask your church to focus on mission and proclaiming His Kingdom instead of money and possessions. People don't always like it if you say that in the church. Many people choose the safety of a church, a good job or a secure future for your children. My experience is that God's mission is often directly the opposite of this.

Interviewee EE: "Going against the flow is typical of pioneers." It is good if supporters recognize this and can set up a discussion group that thinks along together and covers their backs. This is valuable when new paths are being explored and discovered that do not guarantee return for the future. If the pioneer goes through doubts the group can be there to support and think through issues together. The discussion group ensures that the work is healthily embedded and can help guide and, in situations of crisis with the pioneer, support the fellowship (see Noort et al. 2008:49). It can be helpful to have a mediator as a sort of buffer between the pioneer and the existing church. The mediator can translate the work and expectations of the pioneer to the church and vice versa (J).

It is important that good support is given for a sustained period of time. It is better to support with less money for a longer period of time than with more money expecting a new church to be planted in three years, respondents said. Possibly the church planter can have another job or small business alongside. Realistic expectations play an essential part (BB). "A small church can be really inspirational for other places or be like a laboratory where things are revealed about the gospel in modern context. Don't give up on the pioneer on issues that he shouldn't give up on, or he'll burn out," said mentor J. Or they are inclined to put pressure on family and others to reach the goals. Even if the person is doing the work

well, the situation can be more complex, BB explained: “In America, anyone can plant a church, but in Europe the climate of unbelief and secular humanism is really challenging, especially in the cities. The feeling that we don’t need God, and that the Christian church is weak, prevails.”

So when can you speak of success? Y:

If people in the new church plant feel they have their church family there and find pastoral care there. If the church has become part of the neighborhood for local inhabitants even if they don’t go there themselves. If people have got to know each other’s mistakes and personality traits and found them irritating, but still stay, because the church has become their family.

### 3 Concluding Reflections

In his book *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure*, J.R. Briggs (2014) states that a “robust theology of failure” is extremely important for every church, paying attention to grace and the recognition of Jesus as the foundation of mission and life. In a culture of grace, vulnerability and failure become part of the church planting story and mistakes are seen as something to learn from. Similarly, the starting point for this research was not the prevention of disappointment or crisis but the understanding that these crises are a part of life and that vulnerability and hope are actually important elements of the gospel that the (mostly Dutch) church planters seek to live out and share. To some extent the experience of crisis can produce new insight, strengthen faith, and release creativity.

Most church planters in this research testified that it is especially in these difficult or vulnerable situations that the grace of God becomes more and more evident. They also feel that experiencing helplessness or failure can break ground for a new sense of trust (J, U, G, FF). During the workshop in Amsterdam, several pioneers agreed with the statement, “I needed a crisis to focus on the right things” (similarly, interviewees D, T).

So, perhaps the best question for church planters is how to make the best of an (inevitable) crisis, and what is required to make that happen. It may very well be that the key to a sustainable church plant and an inspiring leadership lies exactly here. This research shows that resilience is primarily related to the church planter’s spirituality and a culture of grace and trusting in God in the church. First and foremost, a strong theological conviction of *missio Dei*

appears to be important. Time and again, the church planters in this research emphasize how believing that it is God's mission and not ours helps them to prioritize, to accept failure, to trust God in difficulties, to open themselves up to divine guidance, and to find courage to cross boundaries. Moreover, this particular faith conviction seems pivotal in the building of a strong individual and relational spirituality.

In a recent study on Christian mission in Western urban settings, church planter and theologian Gert-Jan Roest identifies a number of "idolatries" that threaten a healthy Christian spirituality in the West (2016). We discuss the two most relevant idolatries here with regard to church planters and their spirituality.

The first idolatry that Roest sees is our *individual freedom and autonomy*, resulting in the highest aim of self-development and fulfilment. In this research with church planters it was made clear that it is really difficult but important to be honest about emotions, doubts and personal capacities and weaknesses. Of course, this is not just a task for individual church planters. Idolatry is not merely rooted in individual behavior; it is also systemic. Creating structures in which the church planter is constantly invited to parade his/her strength, faith, and success, is idolatry writ large. Sending organizations and denominations should do their utmost to create conditions in which it is safe for church planters to be honest about their failures and struggles, and they should help church planters to maintain strong, honest, and non-instrumental relationships with their families and others.

The second idolatry identified by Roest is *human power* that can be seen, for example, in putting one's trust in our intellectual capacities, will-power or feelings. In its core this is a form of unbelief; it reflects a deep-seated belief that when push comes to shove we are on our own. This idolatry results in a fixation on our own successes and in deep self-loathing if we fail. We do not admit that there are powers in the world that we cannot control, and – despite our rhetoric – we find it very difficult to accept that the mission is God's work, not ours. Pioneering work tends to stress achievement, results, and personal strength; and yet at the same time to admit dependence on God's grace. This paradox can cause serious struggles. Is not burn-out just around the corner if you are continuously working for a result that you can have no influence on? Interviewee G:

Psychologically it's really difficult if, when things are going well, God gets all the glory. But if it's not going well, it's your fault, because God doesn't do things wrong. You're continuously inviting people to join in and you

have to continuously let go and give it to God who's the one who will bring all things together in the end.

A well-developed prayer-life is crucial here, according to the pioneers in this research. Living in this paradox of weakness and hard work demands a strong sense of living through grace instead of performance (D, U, F, O). Again, this requires a structural response as well. Sending organizations should help church planters to navigate this paradox. This can be done by adequate theological formation, allowing regular retreats, and by spiritual coaching on the job. As church planters sometimes wrestle with deep doubts and undergo change in their theological convictions, it would be wise if sending organizations disconnected spiritual coaching from the assessment of job performance. In other words, church planters should have someone trusted and safe, with deep theological and spiritual pockets, to share their questions and doubts with.

Much more could be mentioned, but the interview results described above offer many concrete steps that could be taken to improve the sustainability of church plants and pioneers. Here we have highlighted what in our opinion is the most important: the building of a balanced theology of mission and a healthy individual and relational spirituality.

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## 摘要

植堂 – 因宣教原因而建立新的基督教社区 – 在欧洲较大的教会中越来越被接受。由于在欧洲世俗地区的植堂通常资源不足，而且很小，这种教会和宣教的方法提出了其可否持续性的问题。这个问题的部分答案在于教会建立者的能力，即领导这些机构的人。在本文中，我们展示了对欧洲植堂者进行定性研究的结果，看他们是如何应对经常出现的高期望，不明确的结构和困难的“市场”。这项研究显示了植堂者生活中危机的特殊性质，同时也确定了其恢复的来源。其结果既适用于植堂项目的评估，也适用于植堂者的培训和指导。

## Resumen

Plantar iglesias – la creación de nuevas comunidades cristianas por motivos misioneros – está siendo aceptado cada vez más entre las iglesias más grandes de Europa. Este enfoque de la iglesia y de la misión plantea la cuestión de la sustentabilidad porque en los sectores seculares de Europa por lo general las iglesias nuevas son pequeñas y cuentan con pocos recursos. Parte de la respuesta a esta pregunta radica en la resiliencia de los que plantan iglesias, es decir, aquellos que lideran estos emprendimientos. En este trabajo presentamos los resultados de un estudio cualitativo de europeos que plantan iglesias con el propósito de observar cómo enfrentan a lo que a menudo parece ser una mezcla de altas expectativas, estructuras poco claras y un “mercado” difícil. Esta investigación muestra la naturaleza particular de las crisis en la vida de uno que planta iglesias, mientras que identifica fuentes de resiliencia. Los resultados son relevantes tanto para la evaluación de proyectos para plantar iglesias como para la formación y el entrenamiento de los que plantan iglesias.